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BUREAU OF WATER
WATER QUALITY DIVISION



Paper or Plastic?

One of the most common questions asked by grocery store employees: Paper or Plastic? Four out of five costumers will reply plastic. In some ways this is a good choice, because paper bags contribute 70% more air pollution than plastic bags. Although it can be equally said that twenty percent of paper bags are recycled, while only 1% of plastic bags are recycled. So then what truly is the best choice environmentally?

Picking plastic appears to be a tree hugger's best choice. It takes ninety-one percent less energy to recycle a pound of plastic than a pound of paper. However, most plastic bags are made from polyethylene, which is made from crude oil and natural gas. Those are non renewable resources. If it is not imperative to use plastic bags, then we should probably save the materials used to make them for something else.

The alternate choice is paper bags. Unlike plastic, they are nonrenewable resources. However, they require four times as much energy to produce than plastic bags. Paper bags are durable and once their trip from the grocery store to home is over, they often are used in crafts with younger children or school projects.

The smart decision? Don't rely on stores to provide bags all the time. Instead, bring reusable bags that can be easily stored and kept in the car. As minor as this seems, if everyone brought their own it would make a huge impact. In New York City alone, one less grocery bag per person, per year, would reduce waste by five million pounds and save \$250,000 in disposal costs. IKEA stores in Australia began charging ten cents per bag for costumers. Immediately, more and more people began to bring their own. I can

suggest to a local Summerville grocery store, Publix for example, that they could offer incentives for costumers to bring their own bags one designated day a week as a trial, and it could actually begin to be something regular. Many people may laugh it off, saying that trying to get an entire community to do something as different as this is impossible. However, not only would this benefit the environment, with less plastic bags flying around on the highway, and paper sitting in landfills, but it also saves the individual grocery stores money. On average it can cost up to twenty cents per bag for them to buy.

This is a reasonable solution that is at least worth a try. Next time I'm asked "Paper or Plastic?" I'll be one of the few that instead of replying either of the two options, hands them my own bag. I believe we can talk all we want about making the environment better, but only when actions are actually followed through does it make a difference.